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ABSTRACT

This issue addresses the relationship between teachers and parents of handicapped children. It explores how barriers to an effective parent-teacher relationship arise and how best to work toward a better relationship, one in which parents can positively influence the teacher's involvement with them and, in turn, one in which the teacher can enhance how the parents feel about their child. Informal meetings between teachers and parents are encouraged. A list of "do's and don'ts" for parents advises them to have realistic expectations about what the school can and cannot do, educate themselves about their child's disability and the school's programs and goals, be honest and avoid a defensive attitude, contact the school immediately before a problem becomes serious, attend school-related activities and conferences, and talk with other parents. A similar list for teachers encourages them to create an atmosphere of warmth and good feelings, be sensitive to body language, write and speak clearly without using jargon, become acquainted with community resources, convey that the child is likeable, and develop mutually arrived at goals with the parent. Other short articles discuss problems with homework and improving parent-professional interactions. (VW)

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Parent and Teacher Relationships

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Special Parent ★Special Child

Practical pointers for parenting handicapped children

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PARENT AND TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

Parents and teachers of special children have a common purpose: to provide the best care for the special child. Although both profess to wanting the same thing they are coming from opposite sides of the fence. The teacher, for one, has **chosen** to become a special education teacher and is acclaimed for entry into a field that garners much praise from the outside world for its intrinsic value and ennobling qualities. This automatically raises the teacher's feelings of self worth and self-esteem.

The parent, on the other hand, has **not chosen** to have a child who is anything less than normal. To the parent, the birth of a disabled child necessitates continuing adjustment to a sorrowing event. Contrary to the special education teacher who is gratified by her involvement, the special parent must cope with feelings of sadness and an often pervasive loss of self-esteem.

When the special child reaches school age, parents and teachers too often unwittingly find themselves in an adversarial relationship instead of as equal partners working together to maximize the special child's potential.

In this issue we will explore how barriers to an effective parent-teacher relationship arise and how best to work towards a better relationship, one where parents can influence the teacher's involvement with them positively and, in turn, where the teacher can enhance how the parents feel about their special child.

Why barriers exist

Teachers and other professionals seeking to help the special parent are often intimidating which has the adverse effect of making the parent feel inadequate or humiliated. Instead of being able to communicate openly, special parents become so threatened they react with guilt, anger or denial. Many times special parents find themselves on the receiving end of mixed messages; they are alternately praised, blamed, ostracized, encouraged, admired and pitied—often by the same professional!

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Linda Murphy, M.S., is the founder and for the past 15 years has been the director of a widely known, approved school for mentally handicapped children serving children ages 5-21 in Westchester County, NY, and surrounding areas. A lecturer, teacher and administrator, she is a foster parent and the parent of a handicapped child, too.

Suzanne Della Corte, M.S., for 15 years co-director of the school, is responsible for curricula, staff development and supervision. She is author of numerous research projects in the field and has edited psychology textbooks for a leading New York publisher.

This kind of thoughtlessness causes unnecessary resentment. Special parents are better served by a practical, nonjudgemental and understanding approach, one offering workable suggestions that will not only improve matters but will not detract from other pressing obligations and family needs.

Both parent and teacher bring specific knowledge to the common goal of helping the special child. The child's teacher brings a variety of specialized teaching techniques and methods to help the special child learn and behave to the best of his or her abilities.

The parent, on the other hand, is able to provide keen insight based on firsthand, intimate knowledge of his own child. It is, after all, the parent who knows best how his child will react to certain situations or respond to certain techniques.

Teachers who are unaware of or who choose not to avail themselves of parental insights are losing a valuable ally as well as creating unnecessary obstacles. For the most part special parents are the best judge of their own skills and limitations regarding their disabled child. The teacher who is unable to recognize this fact might be making well-intentioned suggestions to the parent on ways to work with their special child that are difficult or nearly impossible to carry through at home.

Unless there are mechanisms for parent and teacher to communicate honestly and with mutual understanding of each other's role even the best of plans will lead to frustration, resentment and the laying of blame at each other's door.

Creating a better relationship

The teacher who is comfortable with making the special parent aware that the parent is considered skillful and his special offspring likeable goes a long way toward building trust and an enduring partnership. The special education teacher, above all other professionals, should have significant training in how to be supportive, empathic and sensitive to the special parents' needs. The special education teacher should, for instance, recognize that the school day ends at 3 P.M. and that the special parents' day lasts for 24 hours.

Parents, by the same token, should recognize that there is just so much that can be accomplished during the school day. With effort and support from home, teachers can and do motivate the special child to achieve academically, socially and emotionally. Ideally, both parent and teacher should encourage each other to put forth their best efforts to provide an atmosphere for the special child to learn and grow.

The get acquainted meeting. The best way to create a better relationship is to begin at the beginning, preferably as close to

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the start of the school year as possible. The teacher should plan informal get-togethers with the parents to get acquainted as much as to allay parental anxiety. What is unknown can often cause undue concern.

At the first meeting, which should be as relaxed and informal as possible, the teacher might choose to show a film or demonstrate some of the classroom materials that are specific to the remediation of learning difficulties. In a general way the teacher can explain how the students in the class are evaluated, what the educational tests mean and what the procedures are for relaying information to the parent. This could include weekly reports, scheduled telephone conference calls, informal notes, daily experience notebook where the teacher jots down the days events. The format and dates of the formal report card conference could be one of the topics covered at the informal meeting, if need be. How the goals stated in the child's individualized education program (IEP) are translated into daily reading, math, and writing instruction activities could also be outlined but in a general way.

The teacher could also discuss with parents the schools's homework policy and how parents should supervise their children's school responsiblities. Coordinating home and school routines such as absentee notes, making up for absences and anything else pertinent to closer home and school relationships could be discussed. Asking if the parent has any special hobbies or skills such as cooking, photography, etc. that they could share with the class is a good ice-breaker and is helpful in creating an atmosphere where parental involvement is welcomed.

A sign-up sheet for parents desiring individual conferences could be distributed. Feedback questionnaire sheets could also be given out to find if the parent wishes to continue to have informal meetings. It's important to determine the most convenient times and dates for parents to meet, especially in the case of the working or single parent.

Parents should also be given information on the most convenient time for the teacher to be reached. Hopefully, this will forestall inappropriate interruptions of valuable classroom time.

Parents who, for whatever reason, are unable to attend informal meetings should be contacted by phone or note. The same kind of information presented at the informal meeting could go home by letter or, if the teacher has time, by home visit.

The informal classroom meeting should also include light refreshments which will prompt socializing. If it is at all possible, the teacher could get together a display of pamphlets, books or bibliographies that might prove helpful.

Informal meetings are quite different from back-to-school nights and the more formalized parent-teacher conferences. The informal approach is invaluable. The teacher who takes the time to organize such meetings has in reality raised the comfort level of parents and opened channels of communication that help form a productive school year.

Do's and dont's for parents

• **Do have realistic expectations about what the school can and cannot do.** Finding out about all aspects of your child's disability will help you to estimate how far he can go. Ask teachers and other professionals for reading material or find resources about your child's problem areas. Join a parent support group or parent-teacher organization that will help you determine if the school is effective in helping your child.

• **Do become an educated parent.** Find out all you can about the nature of your child's disability and how it affects school performance. This will help you avoid the pitfall of making unrealistic demands for academic achievement on **both** your child and his teacher.

• **Don't assume the school can do everything without your assistance.** Find out what the school is doing and what their strategies are. Perhaps there are things you can do at home that will reinforce school activities. Keeping in close contact strengthens the parent-teacher team.

• **Do be honest.** If you are having a problem at home, alert the school so they can either make recommendations or see if the problems interfere with school performance.

• **Don't immediately leap to the defensive** if the school contacts you with problems they are having with your child. No matter how difficult this may seem, think of this as an opportunity to share information and ideas. Suggest a meeting so you can address the problem together.

• **Do suggest to your child's school** that you have scheduled conference phone calls or notebooks so that you can exchange information and constructive ideas. Find out if your child's school has a home-school coordination plan. Perhaps there is a policy about the frequency and duration of parent-teacher contacts or telephone calls. If there aren't any parent-teacher involvement policies perhaps you can suggest one that might be beneficial.

• **Don't wait until a problem becomes serious** before contacting the school. If your child seems unhappy or frustrated, contact the school immediately. Alert the teacher to any problems you feel are significant. Many times minor problems can be solved before they reach crises proportions if home and school have open lines of communication.

• **Do take advantage of back-to-school night,** parent-teacher conferences and other school-related activities. Get together formally or, if informally, through **regular channels** so that there is a consistent approach toward your youngster.

Knowing what goes on at school can extend and enrich your child's school performance.

• **Do talk to other parents.** Join a parent-teacher organization, a special education P.T.A. or a parent support group. If there isn't one, perhaps you can organize one.

• **Do make sure you understand the terminology** used by your child's teacher in describing your child's unique needs. This will avoid confusion about your child's specific disability and is especially important in helping you to develp ways to help him constructively. Often, professionals use terms that are clear to them but not to you. Don't be afraid to ask questions or to seek another opinion.

• **Don't dredge up the past** unless it's to alert the teacher about strategies that have been tried previously and have not worked. Tirades about poor teachers or inadequate schools serve no useful purpose and often alienate others.

• **Don't get angry if you find** that the school does not include you in making decisions about your child as much as you want. Anger often turns off those people who are in a position to help. Instead, restate clearly that the best approach to educating your child is if both parties know what the other is doing. In that way neither parent nor teacher inadvertently sabotages each other's efforts. Schools are often resistant to change and in many cases parent involvement is a **big** change. By showing the teacher that you are calm, confident and know a great deal about your child and his disability, your input is apt to be welcomed.

• **Do adopt a positive attitude** towards your child's school. Speaking negatively about school, education or the teacher fosters a disrespectful attitude and can contribute to poor school performance. If, however, you have a genuine interest, chances are your child will, too. A feeling of mutual respect and commitment between parent and teacher is your special child's best ally.

Do's and don'ts for teachers

• **Do create an atmosphere of warmth and good feelings.** Make sure that anytime you meet with parents the room is comfortable, well-lit and with ample seating. Don't allow outside calls or other people to intrude or interrupt. This conveys to the parent that their needs are unimportant.

• **Don't sit behind your desk** with parents forced into cramped child-size chairs. This is an instant barrier to honest and productive communication.

• **Do remember that if the parent perceives** the teacher as indifferent or formidable, the relationship becomes strained and nonproductive.

• **Do be especially sensitive to body language,** both yours and the parents'. Remember, facial expressions, posture, body positions (such as crossed arms) send messages concerning what you and the parent really feel.

• **Don't use language that is jargon-based** when you are discussing the child. This does not clarify things, it merely confuses the parent. Moreover, the use of jargon does not convey sincerity.

• **Do write report cards, notes and reports that are clear, concise,** nonthreatening and jargon-free. Make sure parents get copies of reports as well.

• **Don't threaten, scold or set yourself up as the authority.** This turns parents off and elicits evasiveness not cooperation. Remember that the parent is an authority in his own right and a parent knows his offspring better than anyone.

• **Do become acquainted with community resources** such as after-school programs, summer camps, respite or child-care services. In this way, you will be regarded by the parent as a supportive ally.

• **Don't show disbelief regarding any information** the parent volunteers. Quite often there is a marked discrepancy between home and school performance. Dismissing a parent's description of a skill the child displays at home as untrue because it was not noted at school or vice versa causes much anger and resentment. The issue is how to work together, not to invalidate parent information. Parent comments should not be viewed as insignificant but as helpful because they often fill in the picture about the child's unique needs.

• **Do be honest with parents.** Teachers are human, they make mistakes like everyone else. It's best to state "I don't know" if this is the case and make it clear you will make a concerted effort to investigate any problems.

• **Do remember that the reality of any situation** differs depending on whether it is the parent or teacher's point of view. The teacher, for example, might perceive the child as not working up to his potential whereas the parent sees this as the teacher not motivating the child. Somewhere in the middle of this is a child exhibiting problems. It is only through honest communication, being careful not to lay blame, that this problem can be addressed.

• **Do make every effort to convey to the parent that his child is likeable** and possesses admirable traits or talents. Too often the special child is educated in an atmosphere where his deficits and problems take precedence. Remember the child's assets and mention them often.

• **Do let the parent know when something** positive has occurred. This needn't be a major breakthrough, just a note perhaps about Johnny's good behavior, or ability to stay with the lesson or any other improvements. Progress in special education is inch-by-inch and everyone's acknowledgement of this fact will help develop a better relationship.

• **Don't be discouraged by parents who seem to make demands** or who corner you at every opportunity. There is a hidden agenda that prompts such behavior. Put yourself in their place; in all probability they have been hurt in the past or perhaps they are under stress. Reassure the parents and make sure they are aware how much you care about their child and his progress. Set up **mutually convenient times** where you can be available to them.

• **Do develop with the parent mutually arrived at goals.** Make sure each one is clear about his or her individual responsibilities. The teacher cannot do everything and neither can the parent. It's only through a joint effort that the parent-teacher relationship prospers and the special child benefits.

THE READER ASKS

Q. My child, age 12, has tremendous problems doing his homework. It's a nightly battle and the school constantly complains that his homework is incomplete or not done at all. What can I do?

A. There are many ways parents can help with homework. A parent should provide the proper atmosphere for home study. If possible, set aside an area for homework apart from the general living area, with table or desk space. A quiet atmosphere for working is essential: no distractions, no annoyances from other members of the family or even pets. Provide proper lighting, desk or table lamp if needed. Proper tools also help: paper, pencils, eraser, suitable dictionary, reference works, magazines, newspapers, etc. Make a schedule or time for doing assignments.

Parents should supervise but **never actually do the work.** Encourage your child to do a good job without pressure. Allow the school to be the "homework disciplinarian." Instead, spend your time and effort stimulating your child to want to learn. Take a positive attitude towards the homework assignments; show an interest and make inquiries. Check the completed homework to see if it has been done carefully and neatly.

In addition, parents can contribute to the child's general knowledge by providing for shared experiences such as trips to a zoo, museum, library. Remember that reading with your child is another important home activity.

Psychologist's corner: TALKING TO A PROFESSIONAL

by George Popper, Ph.D.

Parents of special children have more contact with physicians, psychologists, teachers and social workers than most other parents. Often, the experience can be overwhelming and frightening and sometimes, parents don't really know the right questions to ask. Many parents feel too insecure about what is being said to them and thus are inclined not to ask for clarification.

Through the years I have observed many parent-professional interactions. Here are five things you as a parent can do to get the most out of the professional with whom you are working:

1. Somehow, over the years, people have given physicians and psychologists almost superhuman qualities and abilities. They seem to feel that because someone has a degree after their name they have all of the answers . . . they don't. They do have their training, their experience and valuable knowledge but no one is infallible. It is important to remember that professionals are human beings, too, and that it is their job to help you.

2. If you are meeting someone for the first time, don't be afraid or feel self-conscious about asking them for their credentials and experience. Most competent professionals have no qualms about answering questions related to what they do.

3. Perhaps one of the most important things that a parent can do is to ask questions. There is no

such thing as a ridiculous question. If there is something that is said that needs any clarification, then ask. If both parents are present at a meeting with a professional and one of the parents asks what the other spouse views as an "inappropriate" or "silly" question, it is better to allow the professional to answer the question rather than jump in and criticize your spouse for asking it. More times than not, the answers aren't as obvious as you might think and your jumping in like that might prevent your spouse from asking what might well be a very important question. Talking things over before you have the conference is helpful. It is sometimes helpful to write down an agenda that includes questions you may have or concerns you wish to raise.

4. From time to time parents might experience an unpleasant encounter with a professional. As a result, they may come to feel that all other professionals are not to be trusted or tolerated. Avoiding all psychologists or all physicians because of one bad experience is often unwise and harmful. It is unfortunate but true that negative attitudes persist and influence both parent and professional toward each other and the child.

5. If your child has seen a psychologist for testing, there are some important points to remember. The psychologist is responsible for clearly explaining what tests were used, what they measure, what each of the scores mean, why your child was being tested and how well your child did. This explanation should be done in a way that is understandable to you and you should not be afraid to ask for an explanation of a term or concept that is unclear. The psychologist has an obligation to present information to parents that is useful in helping them to better understand their child and their child's needs. However, some of the statistical information that a psychological or educational test might generate is more confusing than helpful and a psychologist often has to make a decision that certain information is important for a parent to know while some things are not. The psychologist who administered the testing should be the one who explains it and this is something that parents should insist upon. It is also important for parents to receive a copy of the complete psychological report for their own records.

Most importantly, remember that you as the parent are part of a team that includes the professional. The object is to develop a working relationship and a bond that will maximize all that you can do for your child.